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Health, Education, and Human Services Committee receives report from Pinon Unified School District Superintendent

PINON, Ariz. – Last Wednesday, the Health, Education, and Human Services Committee received a report from Larry Wallen, the superintendent of the Pinon Unified School District, which centered on a variety of issues concerning federal funding, teacher retention, school safety, and college/career readiness for students.

Council Delegate Dwight Witherspoon (Black Mesa, Forest Lake, Hardrock, Pinon, Whippoorwill) who represents the Pinon community asked what sort of problems the district faces in regard to recruiting and retaining quality teachers.

Superintendent Wallen explained that the problem with teacher retention is not teacher salary, but the isolated location of the schools.

Teachers often have a different mental image of a remote community. Once they arrive to Pinon, they are often overwhelmed, explained Wallen.

“We deal with a 20 percent turnover with teachers each year,” Wallen said.

The school district recruits many of its teachers from other states, including Colorado, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, Michigan, and Indiana through student-teacher programs.

Delegate Witherspoon asked Superintendent Wallen to highlight some of the safety concerns that the Pinon community and their students face on a daily basis.

Safety issues involve sexual assault, domestic violence, and drugs which often take place outside of school. Mr. Wallen explained that students deal with such issues far too often, which distracts them from learning and excelling in the classroom.

“Students need to come to school ready to learn,” said Wallen. “We can’t be the social services agency for the community.”

Although school safety is always a concern, Wallen made it clear that he does not support proposed school safety legislation recently introduced by Arizona Attorney General Tom Horne.

Arizona House Bill 2656, introduced on Feb. 19, would allow one trained school official to carry a gun on campus to protect students and school officials in the event of an emergency.

Aside from school safety, funding issues also make it difficult for the school district to provide extra-curricular school activities and programs that present students with opportunities to focus on positive things rather than facing negative temptations outside of school.

“What else can we do to help you and your district?” asked Council Delegate Joshua Lavar Butler (Tõ Nanees Dizi). “Often we have a lot of dialogue about the problems, but we also need to take action.”

Wallen said he would like to see increased funding to pursue programs such as the nationwide “2+2 Program,” which allows high school juniors and seniors to take college-level courses with the intent of sending more high school students to college.

The problem is not a lack of intelligence on the students’ part, Wallen said, mentioning one high school senior who was recently awarded the United States Presidential Scholarship.

HEHSC Chairperson Council Delegate Jonathan Hale (Oak Springs, St. Michaels) expressed his support for Pinon School District’s endeavors while acknowledging that the issues Pinon School District faces are common throughout the reservation and affect learning for many Navajo students.

HEHSC members voted to accept the report from Superintendent Wallen with four supporting and zero opposing.

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